



How Claudia Forestieri Made the Pivot from Journalism to Scripted Television

The creator and executive producer of *The Gordita Chronicles* started her career as a producer and on-air reporter at Telemundo before making a big pivot into scripted television. In this conversation, she details the steps that were required, and the power of celebrating each small win.

Alicia Menendez: Claudia Forestieri started her career in Spanish language news, but she knew deep down that what she really wanted to do was write for television. What she did not know was the path it would take to get her there. Her journey required big leaps of faith, a lot of patience, and, as she tells us, redefining her definition of success. The show she created, *The Gordita Chronicles*, is now streaming on HBO Max, and it is a reflection of Claudia's own experience as a young Dominican transplanted in Miami, but it's also a testament to preparation and staying the course, even after you worry your moment has passed.

Menendez: Claudia, thank you for being here.

Claudia Forestieri:

Thank you for having me.

Menendez: I feel like I've been hanging out with you because I've been watching *Gordita Chronicles*. And so I feel like we're childhood friends now.

Forestieri: Aw, that's so sweet. Thank you.

Menendez: *Gordita Chronicles* based in part, sort of inspired by parts of your life, but it's not a one-to-one translation.

Forestieri: Yeah. So this whole show, our 10 episodes, were co-created with me and Brigitte Muñoz-Liebowitz, our freaking brilliant showrunner, and also eight other wonderful writers who also had experiences of their own that we mined for these episodes.

Forestieri: So when I came to the United States, I actually came at 7, and then Cucu in *Gordita* is 12. And I made that change for a couple reasons, one being that 12, you have more agency in your life and it makes for better watching because the stories are a little bit more grown up, and also for our fictional Cucu, it was going to be even tougher because at 12, you have your friends, you have your family, you're more established in your day to day life than at 7. When I came at 7, I just felt totally powerless in a way. And also, I feel like it felt more traumatic in the beginning. However, I overcame it faster because I was younger.

Menendez: Claudia, I want you to take me back to the fourth grade and the essay competition that changes your life.

Forestieri: Yeah, so it was just presented as an assignment in class. My teacher, I believe her name was Miss Litman, she was wonderful. She had a Corvette, and I'll never forget her. And she assigned us an essay, and the prompt was, I wish. Write about a wish. And I wrote, I Wish I

Were Skinny. And I had no idea that the winning essay contest was going to be read out loud for the whole school. So I handed an essay on, let's say, a Tuesday, and on Friday, the principal, I believe her name was Dr. Dansky... I remember because she was a woman with a PhD, so I was very impressed by her. And she starts reading this essay, I Wish I Were Skinny.

Forestieri: And when she read the title, I'm like, oh my God, I'm not the only one who has that wish. And then she keeps reading and reading, and then the essay just talked about my parents telling me they wish I would lose weight, doctors, me getting bullied. And at the moment, I was also in ballet class, and they had told me that I could never dance on pointe if I wouldn't lose weight because I could break my toes. So that was my biggest wish at 9 years old.

Forestieri: And I was mortified. But at the same time, it was really cool to hear the words I had written broadcast for the whole school to hear. And everybody's looking at me, and I was mortified but also gratified because I'm hearing what I wrote and I had put a lot of work into the essay. And then that day, something kind of magical happened. So my teachers, my friends, even a couple of the kids that used to bully me, everybody was a lot nicer to me because I had shown myself to be vulnerable.

Forestieri: So I learned at a very young age how gratifying it could be to just hear your own words and tell your own story, and how you think that by revealing your weakness, people are going to look down on you, but it was the opposite. So that was my first taste. That's when I got hooked on writing.

Menendez: Hooked on writing, hooked on the power of your voice, but that doesn't immediately translate to entertainment or to writing fiction. In fact, it takes you down a path that'll be familiar to a lot of people, myself included, which is that you use the power of your voice and the power of storytelling in the service of news and information. What was leading you there?

Forestieri: Well, I was always nosy as a little kid. I like to say part of the reason that I held onto my Spanish... It wasn't only because my parents said that at home, we always had to speak Spanish. And we were growing... I had the privilege of growing up in Miami, where it's a very, very bilingual city. But the real reason is I wanted to know all the chisme. I wanted to know what my mom was talking about when she was calling Santa Domingo and lowering her voice, which is always a telltale sign that somebody's saying something you're not supposed to be listening to.

Forestieri: So I always had that yearning for el tiki-tiki. I always did really well in English classes, with the creative writing, but it was '80s and '90s. I had no idea how to break into TV. I'm in Florida, like 3,000 miles away from Hollywood.

Forestieri: The only role model that I had that showed me a path to how I could maybe get into movies and storytelling and TV shows was Oprah Winfrey. So I adored Oprah. And when it came time to choose a major at the University of Florida, go Gators, I chose broadcast news. And I figured, well, Oprah started out in news, and look at her now. I'm going to go down that route.

Forestieri: I started working for a local ABC affiliate as a camera person and editor on the weekends while I was going to school Monday through Friday, then I got my big break working for Telemundo when I graduated from college, and I worked at Channel 51, Noticiero 51, in Miami.

Menendez: No, but I want you to say it in a Telemundo voice. Noticieros!

Forestieri: Reportando en vivo, desde Los Angeles, Claudia Forestieri, para Noticiero ... 51. I graduated from college. I go to Miami. I get a job at Channel 51, but it was behind the scenes. It was not reporting because you had to have a lot of years of experience to be a reporter. But then I find out... So the Miami Telemundo affiliate was... Miami is a huge Spanish language news market. And the Telemundo affiliate was one of the biggest and most important in the whole country. So I realized, well, if I want to get my big break, it's going to be really hard to get my big break here. I'm probably going to have to go to another Telemundo station.

Forestieri: I find out there's an opening in the Telemundo Bay Area station. So I sent my tape, sent my resume. I don't hear anything. I don't know where I got this idea or where I got the balls to do this, but I was like, okay, I'm going to need somebody to recommend me. I'm going to go to the general manager of the station that's currently employing me. And as the general manager, his name was Jose Consela, and I made an appointment with the secretary, and I'm like Mr. Consela, I want to be a reporter. And there's an opening in the Bay Area, and I want you to recommend me, which is crazy. But the funny thing is, actually, it worked.

Forestieri: So it was a big coup for me, being gordita, to get a job as a TV reporter in Spanish language TV news, especially because I would say about half of the female newscasters are literally beauty queens from Latin America. I've worked alongside Miss Nicaragua, Miss Venezuela, Miss Guanajuato. I was ecstatic, but I got the job. And then that started a 12 year career at Telemundo, where I worked at Telemundo Miami, Telemundo [inaudible 00:08:23], Telemundo Chicago, Telemundo Los Angeles. And this time, though, behind the scenes as a producer because I was tired of dieting and blow drying my hair.

Menendez: But you low key, during this career news, know somewhere in your heart that what you actually want to do is write for television.

Forestieri: Yes. That's always what I wanted to do, I just didn't know a path towards it. I was in Chicago on September 11th, and that was a really crazy time. I was working for Buenos Dias Chicago, and the newscast got canceled. Everybody was very scared, and my sister was like, come home to Miami. Just take a break. So I went to Miami, I took a break. I still had the dream of writing for TV, but I was like, oh, I'm going to be close to family now.

Forestieri: So fast forward to 2008, I have a boyfriend, and me and him want to be TV writers, but we don't know how to break in. So that year, and I believe that's the only year that ever happened, Alex Nogales from the National Hispanic Media Coalition did a little tour of cities with big Latino populations. So he came to Miami to recruit people to apply for their Latino writers program. And he talked about the need for Latino writers, he started talking about how you break in. And it was like if Jesus had descended from the heavens...

Menendez: I was about to say fairy godmother, but yes, Jesus works too.

Forestieri: And I was like, oh my God, wait, this is my way in. And by then I was like 34, 35. And I was like, oh, can I really do this?

Forestieri: We didn't get in, but by then it was too late because I was already like, I had seen the light, and I'm like, I see a path. And they need Latinos. This man came from California to tell me, in Miami, we need Latino writers. And that's what I want to do.

Forestieri: So I wanted to move LA. The guy I was dating was like, nope. And I was like, see ya. But it was a hard moment because I knew my mom was going to be really upset because I'm leaving Miami again. And this time, I was 35. I remember my aunt was helping me pack, and I'm giving away some things, and I had some nice dishes. I had Fiesta dishes that my mom had given me, really beautiful and colorful, and I'm giving them to my aunt. I'm like,

here. And she's like, you're going to give me your beautiful plates? I'm like, yes, take them. And then she's wrapping, and she's like, well, I hope this move is worth it. And I was like, ah! I almost wanted to start crying. I'm like, what if it's not? I'm giving away all my things, all my furniture.

Forestieri: And then I get to LA, and I thought... I mean, okay, it wasn't that I thought they were giving away TV writing jobs at LAX, but I had no idea.

Menendez: And you end up in a catering job.

Forestieri: Yes. Actually, catering was a step up from the first job I had to do, which was working as a background actor, because background acting paid you minimum wage, and catering paid like \$15 an hour. So I was very lucky to get that catering job. That was actually a fun job, but I was like, wow. I used to be a TV reporter, and now I'm doing catering. But I'm like, hey, at least... I had to change my perception of success, which was... I thought success would be landing that TV job. So I had to change my mind, and I'm like, okay, I'm going to define success as being able to pay the rent every month and being able to stay in LA so I can have access to writing classes, the WGA library, where I often went to research scripts.

Forestieri: I remember going to a seminar that first summer that I was here, summer of 2009. And they said it takes seven to ten years to break in because you need to get the level of your writing... You have to be writing like a professional TV writer in order to break in. When I heard that, I'm like, okay, yeah, but that's for the average person, not for me. I worked for Telemundo. I mean, come on, it's going to take me half. It took me nine years. Nine years.

Menendez: I just want to sit with that for a second because I think that there are a lot of our listeners who want to pivot from a thing that they're doing that maybe they do or don't love to something else that they want to do. And I just want to honor what it is I am hearing from you because we hear about a lot of overnight successes. I mean, the fact that you stuck with it for nine years, searching for those little signs of like, I am being affirmed. Here's a small opportunity that's opening up. I think that is a lot closer to the path that most of us are on than, "I hopped off the plane at LAX with a dream and a cardigan."

Forestieri: Yeah. One thing, I had to learn to fall in love with the journey of becoming a writer, and not fixate so much on the end goal. Just the fact that like I can take a class at script anatomy and be able to pay for it, and be able to pay my rent and put gas in the car, that had to be a victory. Meeting a new writer or joining a new writer's group... There was a point that I was in three different writing groups. And at the end of the day, even now as a writer, most of what you do is you're... Writing is rewriting. You're rewriting, you're honing, you're polishing, you're revising. That's what the job is. So all those nine years, I was preparing for the job that I wanted.

Menendez: We're all always given this advice: Write what you know, write what you know, write what you know. Well, that can go in a lot of different directions for a lot of different people. You could have written a show about being a TV reporter. You could have written a show about being a background actress. And you get a piece of advice that I think is really critical, which is, think of your life in five year windows. When you go through that exercise of all of a sudden chunking your life out into five years, what becomes clear to you?

Forestieri: Yeah. Carol Kirshner gave me that very valuable piece of advice. So 0 to 5, I didn't remember anything. But then when I did 6 to 10, I was like, oh yeah, 7 years old, my life turns upside down. I go from being, I guess, part of the high class... In Puerto Rico, we had a live-in housekeeper/nanny who took care of me all the time, went to one of the best private schools, my dad worked for an airline, we could fly wherever we wanted first class.

And then we come to Miami, and all of a sudden, I'm being called fatso, I'm being made fun of because I can't speak English, and it's this foreign world. And it was kind of traumatic. The first version of this was actually a one hour dramedy because my first recollections were just a little bit of trauma and sadness.

Menendez: Who recommends to you that instead of making this a one hour dramedy, you turn it into a comedy?

Forestieri: That was Frank Ochoa at Sony, who's freaking brilliant. I think, by the way, we need more Latine executives like him because he was able to really see the potential of the story. And it was really, really, really smart of him because there are so many funny moments, and then as soon... I have kid around saying that I would've turned it into a musical, procedural, whatever he would've told me that could sell, but...

Menendez: I am Gordita!

Forestieri: Welcome to Miami! Yeah. But in reality, I always had wanted to write comedies. And one of the reasons I started expanding my range a little bit was because I wasn't having that much success with the comedies I was writing. I now see that's in part because everything I wrote was about Latine community, Latine characters. And I think there weren't enough people, there're not enough Frank Ochoas in this world to recognize a comedy with Latino characters that has potential.

Forestieri: So when he said comedy, part of me was like, oh my God, are you kidding me? Yes, I would love to turn this into a comedy. But comedy is a lot harder than drama for many reasons. Thank God for Brigitte Muñoz-Liebowitz because she's a freaking comedy goddess.

Forestieri: So by the time that we sell this, and HBO Max wants to make a pilot, and again, Frank Ochoa brings up her name. What do you think about having Brigitte Muñoz-Liebowitz show running this? And I was like, oh my God, that's another brilliant idea.

Menendez: It's also the fact that you two are paired means it's the first show that has a head writer and showrunner that are both Latinas. Is that it? Did I get that right?

Forestieri: Yeah, creator and showrunner. I believe so. I mean, I've said that a couple of times, and I keep daring people to fact check me because the journalist in me is always like, Claudia, you better be careful. But I believe we're, maybe if not the first, one of few or very few in the industry. Because usually, you'll have a person of color creator teamed up with someone who's not of color that has the experience because there's decades of... We have a lot of work to do to increase the representation. I don't have to tell you, Latinos are such a huge percentage of the US population and the numbers between the population and what you see on TV and film, there's a huge gap still.

Menendez: What does it feel like to actually have this show up on the air?

Forestieri: It feels amazing. With Cucu, I thought people that I grew up with were going to be like, oh no, you weren't that plucky. You weren't that sassy. But what I've been hearing a lot is, oh yeah, that's exactly... Where did you find this girl? She's like your mini you. She is just like you were growing up. So I'm just really happy not only that the show is out, but I'm ecstatic about how well it's being received.

Forestieri: There's been a lot of people too, like a lot of gorditas are coming out of the closet, posting photos of them as gorditas. I took my mom to the premier, and my mom, I feel like, didn't really quite understand what this was going to be. And I kept trying to tell her, but you know moms. She would just call me, and I had a big meeting with an executive at HBO

Max. I'm like, Mom, I can't talk to you right now. And she's like, well, call me because I can't figure out the cable. And I'm like, okay mommy, yes.

Forestieri: But I took my mom to the premier, and that's when it finally started dawning on her what a big deal this was. She got to meet Zoe Saldana. And then she goes, Claudia, pero mira cuantas gorditas bonitas hay aquí! She's like, oh my God, look how many chubby girls there are here. And I'm like, Mom, be quiet. Not everybody likes to be identified as gordita. That's probably been the best part about the show coming out, is just all the gorditas that have just felt seen. Because growing up, I always wanted to be seen myself. I think that's part of what drove me to be a TV reporter, is because I never saw somebody that looked like me on TV. I wanted to, by being a TV reporter, just let people know, here I am. I have something to say. Listen to me. I'm worthy of being listened to and seen.

Menendez: I love it. Claudia, thank you so much for doing this.

Forestieri: Thank you so much.

Menendez: Thank you, as always, for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode.

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